

BOOK REVIEW

JUDITH SUMNER. 2004. **American Household Botany: a History of Useful Plants 1620-1900.** (ISBN 0-88192-652-3, hbk.). Timber Press Inc. 133 S.W. Second Ave, Suite 450, Portland, OR 97204-3527, U.S.A. (Orders: www.timberpress.com, mail@timberpress.com, 503-227-2878, 1-800-327-5680, 503-227-3070 fax). \$27.95, 396 pp., b/w illus., 16 color plates, 6 1/2" x 9 1/4".

A history of plants in the domestic scene it is, but this book is much more, indeed an encyclopedic reference to the "useful" plants of North America from colonial times. It is also a compendium of the continent's cultural diversity and consequently its culinary as well as horticultural diversity. The author details what plants the early colonists brought from Europe both for comestible and medicinal purposes and how they adapted to the plants that native American tribes used for these and for other uses. Not least in importance was the knowledge of preparing food; for this the author quotes from the notable cookbooks dating from 1672, many of which listed the salutary effects of correct preparation. In order to have food through the long winters the colonists had to learn the best ways for preserving food by correct storage and through cooking methods such as pickling. Imported and native herbs and spices played a large role in both. The passages on the "botanical pantry," detailing the means of curbing growth of bacteria and fungi in fresh and preserved foods, the usages of spices for flavoring (how, for instance, saffras became an important herb for Creole cuisine), the experiments using native plants as substitutes for oriental teas, are engrossing. One of the most important chapters, not surprisingly, as the author teaches medicinal botany in the Arnold Arboretum at Harvard University, is that on herbal medicines, in which she gives insights to the very chemicals that make the plants effective in healing—or dangerous in excess.

While food and medicine are the major portions of the book, the growing and use of plants through these two centuries is extremely valuable. The author tells us such facts as that cotton had become an economic crop by 1607 in Virginia and by the early 1700's was beginning to replace linen (homespun) as an affordable fabric, that American women were testing native plants for dyes and tannin from native plants, and a number of native plants were being used for inks, that public kitchens for the indigent were started in 1890.

Landscape plants are featured as well as the horticultural contributions of William Bartram and Thomas Jefferson. The author delves into the teaching of botany in schools beginning with the first textbook by Almira Phelps in 1829. Soon the discipline was not limited to the classroom but expanded into the garden and eventually to the wild. She also recounts Asa Gray's interest in teaching botany to youngsters, attested by his textbook of 1836 and his numerous contributions to botany, not least his influential *Manual of the Botany of the Northeastern United States* (1848).

This book is comprehensive—from the basic uses of plants for food to the ornamental uses of flowers in the parlor. It is well documented, authoritative, eminently readable, and a good resource for several disciplines.—Joann Karges, Botanical Research Institute of Texas, Fort Worth, TX, 76102-4060, U.S.A.